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Eye On Health

Review & Commentary on Health Policy Issues for a Rural Perspective – August 1, 2021

Rural Economy Needs Vaccination

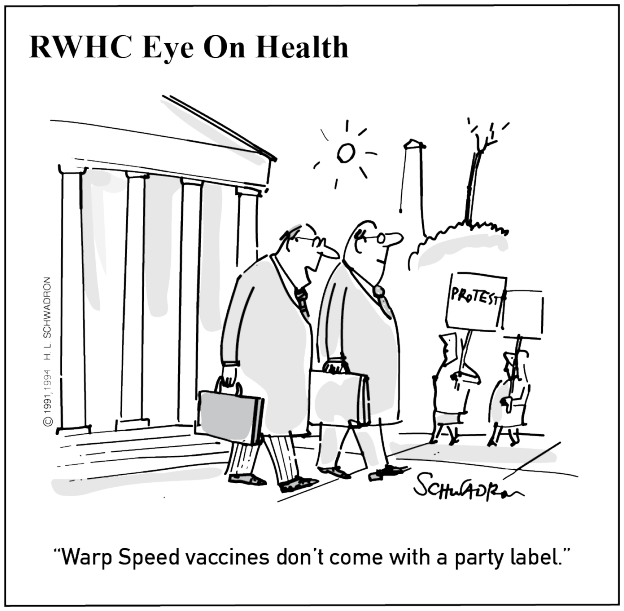
From the commentary "Inside Wisconsin, Vaccinations: A rural emphasis could help economy," by Tom Still, president of the Wisconsin Technology Council in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, 7/11:

"It is 'Roaring 20s, 2.0' in much of America. Stocks are booming, cash is looking for smart places to invest, businesses are clamoring for workers, and materials and products of all types are slowly returning to the supply chain."

"Let's not mess it up by letting COVID-19 creep back in the picture, especially in parts of unvaccinated rural America."

"The latest national data shows that 72% of the people in urban areas across the country have received at least one vaccine shot, compared with 54% in predominantly rural states. Outbreaks tied to the contagious Delta variant of the coronavirus are taking place in parts of Arkansas, Missouri, Florida, Nevada, Wyoming and Utah, states that fall below the U.S. vaccine average–in some cases, by a lot."

"Wisconsin rides above the national average by a couple of percentage points, but even that solid performance varies by location with some rural Wisconsin counties falling well below the line."



"And yet, that latest national data shows it is the unvaccinated who are getting sick, going to the hospital and sometimes dying, not those who already have at least one shot in the arm."

"There are a lot of reasons why so many people are not getting vaccinated, but supply isn't one of them. Shots are available almost everywhere people care to look."

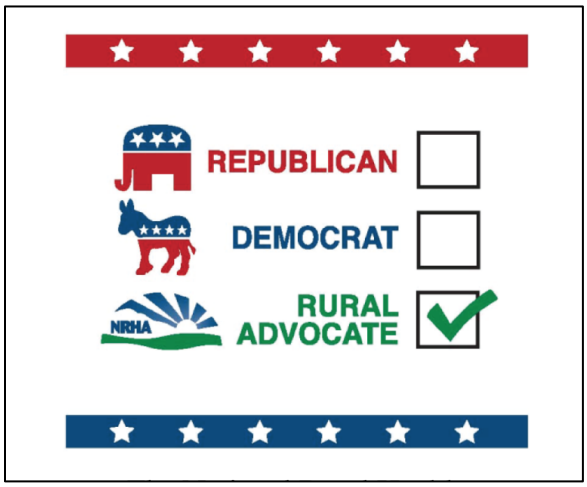
"The hesitancy is more about people fearing side effects, which are mild or non-existent for all but a tiny minority of COVID vaccine recipients; general opposition to vaccines for medical or religious reasons; false security about the virus not reaching their neck of the woods; and politics."

"The political reasons are the oddest in many ways. The Trump administration spent billions on Operation Warp Speed–despite unhelpful messaging surrounding other COVID strategies–and deserves its fair share of credit for bringing the Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson vaccines to market. Rural America backed Trump more than urban America in the 2020 elections, and it remains a bastion of support in many states on the outbreak list."

"For those who trusted Trump enough to vote for him, it only makes sense that they can trust his administration funded, tested and approved one of the medical research and production miracles of the century."

"A medication doesn't change its function when the occupant of the White House changes."- Gerard Baker, *Wall Street Journal*, 7/12/21.

"If there is a jittery side to the markets and the general economy, however, it is that COVID is threatening to stage a comeback in parts of the country and around the world."



"Those jitters should be of particular concern in rural America, including much of Wisconsin, if it reaches the point where investments are not being made and company expansions or moves don't take place for fear of another COVID round."

"A huge amount of federal and state aid is being poured into rural America in the form of broadband development, infrastructure, education, health care, tourism and more, much of which could lie fallow if people become convinced that COVID variant risks are too high."

"People learned during the height of COVID they could work remotely in a lot of places, including in rural or ex-urban locations. They may be less inclined to do so if they believe they are moving from a place where most people are vaccinated to a place where many are not."

"Wisconsin has an advantage over many states in that its rural hospital system is strong and generally held up during the peak of the pandemic. Other states are not so fortunate, and intense rural outbreaks could lead to overrun facilities and lack of treatment."

"The recovery is under way and could extend to much of rural America unless too many people fail to make the right choice about getting vaccinated. Main Street Wisconsin is an engaging place to work, live and relax for people who are looking to escape some of the trials of urban life. Don't discourage them by putting up a billboard, 'Welcome to the Land of the Unvaccinated.' "

Eye On Health is the monthly newsletter of the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative. Begun in 1979, RWHC has as its **Mission** that rural Wisconsin communities will be the healthiest in America. Our **Vision** is that... RWHC is a strong and innovative cooperative of diversified rural hospitals... it is the "rural advocate of choice" for its Members... it develops and manages a variety of products and services... it assists Members to offer high quality, cost-effective healthcare… assists Members in partnerships to make their communities healthier… generates additional revenue by services to non-Members… ongoing use of strategic alliances in pursuit of its Vision. Tim Size <**timsize@rwhc.com**>, Editor, 880 Independence Lane, Sauk City, WI 53583

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GOP Governors Face Vaccine Hesitancy

From "GOP governors implore residents to overcome vaccine hesitancy as Delta variant rises" by Amy B. Wang and Nick Miroff, *Washington Post*, 7/5:

"GOP governors are imploring their residents to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, as polling shows that vaccine hesitancy has been driven by Republicans and as the virus's new, more contagious delta variant has caused recent upticks in COVID-19 cases in areas with low vaccination rates."

"Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R) has expressed concern about possible 'trouble' ahead for Arkansans if the state did not accelerate its vaccination rate. In Arkansas, about 53 percent of adults have at least one dose of the vaccine, compared with about two-thirds of adults nationally. The state has seen a recent spike in COVID cases and hospitalizations, driven mostly by the delta variant."

" 'The solution is the vaccinations,' Hutchinson said adding that while many of the state's senior citizens have gotten vaccinated, the delta variant was now hitting Arkansas' younger, unvaccinated adults. 'It is a great concern.' "

"Hutchinson avoided saying whether he would reimpose mask mandates if the state's numbers did not improve and stopped short of saying Arkansas might experience a third wave of COVID cases and deaths."

"However, he did emphasize that the state would continue to make vaccines accessible–including, for example, offering free shots at the state's 'Pops on the River' celebration."

" 'We are in a race,' Hutchinson said. 'And if we stopped right here, and we didn't get greater percent of our population vaccinated, then we're going to have trouble in the next school year and over the winter. So, we want to get ahead of that curve. Working very hard to do that.' "

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"A new Washington Post-ABC News poll showed 74 percent of people who haven't been vaccinated say they probably or definitely won't get vaccinated–and that the divide fell sharply along party lines. According to the survey, 86 percent of Democrats have received at least one vaccine shot compared with 45 percent of Republicans. Only 6 percent of Democrats said they are not likely to get vaccinated, compared with 47 percent of Republicans, including 38 percent of Republicans overall who said they definitely will not get the vaccine."

"Hutchinson alluded to some of that partisan divide Sunday when asked about why it had been so difficult to increase Arkansas' vaccination rate."

" 'Well, in a rural state, in a conservative state, there is hesitancy. And you're trying to overcome that,' Hutchinson said. 'We got the early vaccinations out because people were anxious. They were in a very vulnerable population. Our cases went down dramatically. And that slowed the vaccination rate. The urgency diminished. And now it's picking up again.' "

"West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice (R) had blunter words Sunday when asked about vaccine hesitancy, particularly among young people, despite the incentives states are offering that include lottery prizes and college scholarships."

" 'The red states probably have a lot of people that are very, very conservative in their thinking and they think, 'Well, I don't have to do that.' But they're not thinking right,' Justice said on ABC's 'This Week.' The governor has aggressively urged his residents to get vaccinated for months, and West Virginia has been offering everything from college scholarships to free hunting and fishing licenses as incentives."

"Despite that, only 52 percent of adults in West Virginia have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine. Justice expressed frustration with the stalled efforts, particularly with getting young people 'across the finish line.' "

" 'When it really boils right down to it, they're in a lottery to themselves,' he said. 'We have a lottery that says if you're vaccinated we're going to give you stuff. Well, you've got another lottery for them, and it's a death lottery.' "

"Justice added that he thought the only thing that would compel some holdouts to get vaccinated would be the deaths of friends and family."

" 'What would put them over the edge is an awful lot of people dying,' he said. 'The only way it's really going to happen is a catastrophe that none of us want. We just have to keep trying.' "

"On CBS's 'Face the Nation,' Gov. Spencer Cox (R-Utah) explained that his state's lower vaccination rate was partly the result of having the country's youngest population, adding that adults in Utah are getting vaccinated at the same rate as rest of nation. He called the vaccination gap among Republicans 'troubling' and said 'hopefully reason will rule.' "

"Months ago, President Biden set a goal of having at least 70 percent of American adults receive at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine by Independence

Day, forecasting that it would be a day the country could celebrate its freedom from the virus. Though the Biden administration fell short of that goal, White House officials have nevertheless touted the efforts as an ongoing success."

" 'I think we're much further along than anyone would have anticipated at this point with two out of three adult Americans with at least one shot,' White House COVID response coordinator Jeff Zients said on CNN's 'State of the Union.' Notably, he added, nearly 90 percent of those age 65 and older had at least one shot, and 70 percent of those older than 27 have received at least one shot."

"Zients said the administration remained concerned about the spike in cases caused by the delta variant in areas with lower vaccination rates, and that there are plans to 'double down on efforts to vaccinate millions more Americans' in July and August."

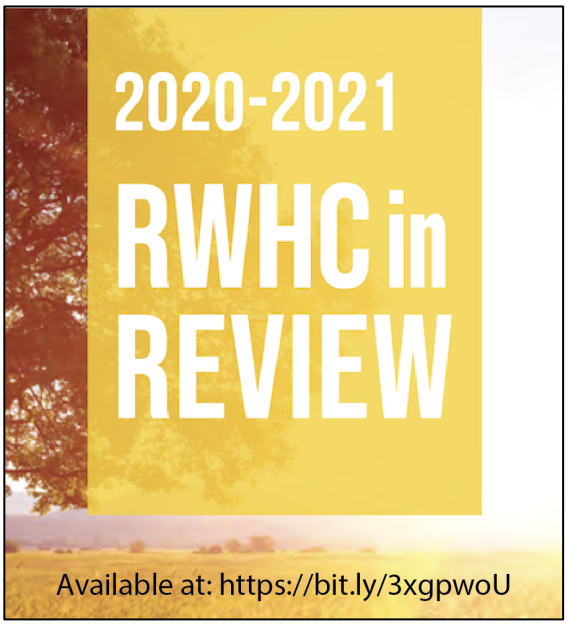
" 'The vulnerability is where vaccination rates are lower,' he said. 'And that's just another reason to not only get yourself vaccinated for your own safety, but also for your family and for your community.' "

"Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's leading infectious-disease expert, lamented the divisiveness that has plagued the country in its efforts to counter the pandemic and stressed that the overwhelming proportion of people who are getting seriously ill or dying from COVID now are those who are unvaccinated."

" 'When you talk about the avoidability of hospitalization and death, it's really sad and tragic that most all of these are avoidable and preventable,' Fauci said on NBC's 'Meet the Press.' "

"Fauci has become a particular pariah among many Trump supporters, who have been inflamed by Trump's continued attacks on the scientist since leaving office. However, Fauci on Sunday dismissed the attacks as 'noise' and urged people to set aside their political differences and realize that the coronavirus is the 'common enemy.' "

" 'Some of the reasons for not getting vaccinated are ideologic, some of them are just fundamentally anti-vax or anti-science or what have you,' Fauci said. 'But, you know, we just need to put that aside now. We're dealing with a historic situation with this pandemic. And we do have the tools to counter it. So for goodness sakes, put aside all of those differences and realize that the common enemy is the virus.' "



Losing Pandemic Telehealth Gains?

From "Persistent myths could send telehealth back to pre-pandemic regulation" by Krista Drobac, executive director of the Alliance for Connected Care, in *Modern Healthcare*, 7/02:

"When asked about the prospects for long-term telehealth coverage, I often hear people say that permanent expansion is inevitable because 'the genie is out of the bottle' or 'Congress never takes benefits away.' "

"The truth is they can, and they will, unless we effectively break down persistent misconceptions about the impact of telehealth policy changes. If we can't do it quickly, we should pivot to asking Congress for an extension of the pandemic flexibilities, thereby affording the industry more time to support the formal publication of government studies and peer-reviewed research that bears out the cost-effectiveness, quality and access expansion of telehealth."

Myth No. 1: "Lifting Medicare telehealth restrictions will cost the program money"

"There is a long-standing perception among policymakers that if telehealth is a permanent

option in Medicare, beneficiaries will have virtual and in-person visits for the same condition, or seek treatment they would have otherwise avoided, thereby creating excess utilization."

"We now have data to effectively dispel this myth. Consistently, across provider type, telehealth proved to be a substitution for in-person care. Overall utilization stayed the same, while telehealth filled in for office visits during peak social distancing periods, and declined as people went back to the doctor's office."

"All of the discussion about utilization has crowded out other areas where telehealth saves Medicare money. For example, skilled-nursing facility transfers decreased during the pandemic due to telehealth. Pre-pandemic studies concluded that approximately 60% to 70% of all nursing home transfers to hospitals are unnecessary. Pandemic data from a large telehealth platform that triages SNF patients via telehealth showed that telehealth consultations from March to July of 2020 successfully diverted millions of dollars of SNF transfers. These patients were treated virtually at an overall rate of 91%, including for high-cost falls with injury (84.79%), shortness of breath (66.67%) and acute or chronic pain (95.96%)."

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"Medicare says follow the science about Covid; they need to do the same about telehealth."

Myth No. 2: "Patients aren't seeing their own doctors"

"The myth paints a picture of virtual-only providers reaching patients directly and charging Medicare for unnecessary treatment. In fact, the opposite is true. A large study of patients' telehealth behaviors during the pandemic showed that 83% of seniors saw their own provider or someone in the same practice. Only 1.4% of seniors saw someone their insurance company recommended, and a paltry 1% saw a virtual provider they didn't know."

Myth No. 3: "Telehealth is uniquely subject to fraud"

"Sensational press releases by the Department of Justice have created the false impression that telehealth is uniquely vulnerable to criminal behavior. No federal regulator or oversight body has yet issued a comprehensive study of Medicare telehealth claims during the pandemic. The reality is that the majority of fraud instances the DOJ highlighted have nothing to do with telehealth and are instead telemarketing scams aimed at billing for durable medical equipment, diagnostic or genetic tests, opioids or compounding pharmacy."

Myth No. 4: "In-person relationship requirements are necessary to mitigate excessive cost and fraud"

"Requiring patients to first complete an in-person visit constrains the ability of providers to virtually treat individuals who are homebound, have transportation challenges, or live in underserved areas. Congress instituted in-person relationship requirements in the first COVID bill in 2020 only to repeal them weeks later. All 50 state legislatures have abolished in-person requirements for telehealth visits, and the American Medical Association and Federation of State Medical Boards have said a physician-patient relationship can be established by telehealth. In-person requirements lower access to care without any meaningful impact on fraud. Cost goes down because of the barrier to people receiving care."

Myth No. 5: "The Biden administration has the authority to make the telehealth changes permanent"

"Congress was responsible for granting the authority that federal agencies needed to allow Medicare to cover telehealth, employers to offer telehealth to part-time and seasonal workers and first-dollar coverage to employees with health savings accounts. These changes will expire with the public health emergency, and the only path to making them permanent is through Congress."

"Data can and will break down these myths and enable effective long-term telehealth policy. As advocates we need to bring that evidence to Capitol Hill."

Who Does 911 Call for 911?

From "Rural Ambulance Services Are in Jeopardy as Volunteers Age and Expenses Mount" by Aaron Bolton, Kaiser Health News, 7/6:

" 'More and more volunteer services are finding this to be untenable,' said Brock Slabach, chief operations officer of the National Rural Health Association."

"Rural ambulance services rely heavily on volunteers. About 53% of rural EMS agencies are staffed by volunteers, compared with 14% in urban areas, according to an NRHA report. More than 70% of those rural agencies report difficulty finding volunteers."

"In Montana, a state Department of Public Health and Human Services report says, about 20% of EMS agencies frequently have trouble responding to 911 calls for lack of available volunteers, and 34% occasionally can't respond to a call."

"When that happens, other EMS agencies must respond, sometimes having to drive long distances when a delay of minutes can be the difference between life and death. Sometimes an emergency call will go unanswered, leaving people to drive themselves or ask neighbors to drive them to the nearest hospital."

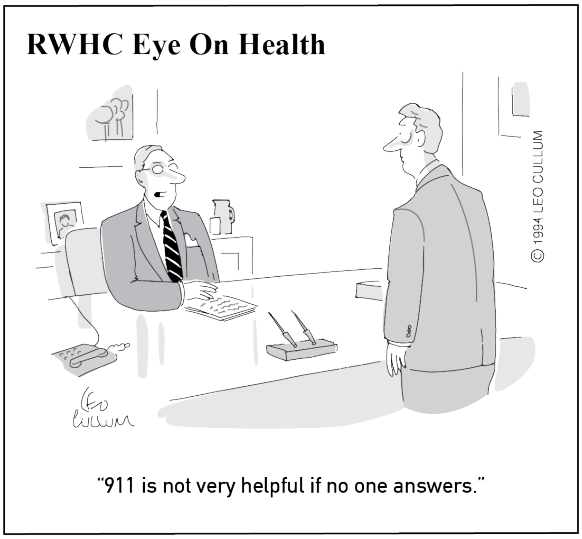
"In addition to personnel shortages, about a third of rural EMS agencies in the U.S. are in immediate operational jeopardy because they can't cover their costs, according to the NRHA."

"Slabach said that largely stems from insufficient Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements. Those reimbursements cover, on average, about a third of the actual costs to maintain equipment, stock medications and pay for insurance and other fixed expenses."

"Many rural ambulance services rely on patients' private insurance to fill the gap. Private insurance pays considerably more than Medicaid, but because of low call volumes, rural EMS agencies can't always cover their bills, Slabach said."

" 'So, it's not possible in many cases without significant subsidies to operate an emergency service in a large area with small populations,' he said."

"Slabach and others say sagging reimbursement and volunteerism means rural parts of the U.S. can no longer rely solely on volunteers but must find ways to convert to a paid staff."



"Jim DeTienne, who recently retired as the Montana health department's EMS and Trauma Systems chief, acknowledged that sparsely populated counties would still need volunteers, but he said having at least one paid EMT on the roster could be a huge benefit."

"DeTienne said he believes EMS needs to be declared an essential service like police or fire departments. Then counties could tax their residents to pay for ambulance services and provide a dedicated revenue stream."

"Only 11 states have deemed EMS an essential service, Slabach said."

"The Montana health department report on EMS services suggested other ways to move away from full-volunteer services, such as having EMS agencies merge with taxpayer-funded fire departments or having hospitals take over the programs."

"In the southwestern Montana town of Ennis, Madison Valley Medical Center absorbed the dwindling volunteer EMS service earlier this year."

"EMS Manager Nick Efta, a former volunteer, said the transition stabilized the service, which had been struggling to answer every 911 call. He said the service recently had nine calls in 24 hours. That included three transfers of patients to larger hospitals miles away."

" 'Given that day and how the calls played out, I think under a volunteer model it would be difficult to make all those calls,' Efta said."

"Rich Rasmussen, president and CEO of the Montana Hospital Association, said an Ennis-style takeover might not be financially viable for many of the smaller critical access hospitals that serve rural areas. Many small hospitals that take over emergency services do so at a loss, he said."

" 'Really, what we need is a federal policy change, which would allow critical access hospitals to be reimbursed for the cost of delivering that EMS service,' he said."

"Under current Medicare policy, federally designated critical access hospitals can get fully reimbursed for EMS only if there's no other ambulance service within 35 miles, Rasmussen said. Eliminating that mileage requirement would give the hospitals an incentive to take on EMS, Rasmussen said."

" 'It's a long haul to do this, but it would dramatically improve EMS access all across this country,' he said."

Leadership Insights: "Pride"

The *Leadership Insights* series is by Jo Anne Preston, RWHC Workforce & Organizational Development Senior Manager. Back issues at **www.RWHC.com**.

"*I'm so proud of you*." This is easy to say to someone else when they have reached a goal, accomplished something they set out to do, or overcome a difficult challenge. That is why I'm going to be proud of you at the end of this article if you can say to yourself, "*I'm proud of myself*." How do you lead with a sense of pride, and why does it matter that you do?

Think back to where you learned what you know about pride. Perhaps the messages were mixed:

- Do a good job, but don't draw much attention to it.
- Work hard, but don't boast.
- Succeed, but don't get too full of yourself, or as my parents would put it, "She's getting a little too big for her britches."

Being successful and trying not to show it too much is a balancing act that sometimes leaves the important feeling of pride lost in the process. Barbara Frederickson's research on positivity validates the ten sources of emotional strength that we need to cultivate to create a satisfying life, one that inspires others. Pride makes this top ten list, and is perhaps the one people are most challenged by. But just because overdoing pride can backfire doesn't mean that we are better off neglecting it.

What is something you feel proud of today? Think of your accomplishments, large or small. My own: I took that walk today instead of sleeping in. I meditated, and have been pretty regularly for about 3 years. I'm writing this article, AND I wrote a book! I am proud of myself for these things.

Then I immediately compare myself and it kind of falls apart. Do you compare? I took a walk, but my brother runs ultra-marathons. I don't meditate every day like my teacher does. My book is not a best seller (yet!) As Barbara Frederickson says, ***"The negative screams at us; the positive only whispers."*** That is why we have to manually adjust the volume and station we tune in to. It takes practice. Notice when you do it, and cue yourself with: *nothing about another person's success diminishes mine*. *There's room for everyone's accomplishments.*

Why is it ok for others to feel proud of you yet you do not claim it for yourself? We assume others will feel proud of us in the moment and then move on, but we fear that if we allow ourselves to feel pride, it will run away with us. If you're reading this far, it's really unlikely that this will happen. You do not need to worry about turning into an ego maniac if you give yourself a couple of minutes a day to say to yourself, "I did well and I'm proud of myself." Experience it with three deep breaths. You'll move on stronger and more

confident, not impossible to live with. Leaders with this humble confidence pave the way and model for their teams to take pride in their achievements as well.

Join pride with gratitude. Who supported or taught you? Are you grateful to even your own higher self for choosing well, or doing the hard thing that got you to your goal that you are proud of? Gratitude softens pride without taking away the feeling of accomplishment as it connects us with purpose.

Pride before a fall, beware! This is fear talking, fear that we will be found to be lacking by someone, creating vulnerability that many would just like to avoid.

But here is an important distinction: *pride is about recognizing and building your sense of worth, not about seeking outward approval*. As a leader (or writer, runner, parent, etc.), there will always be people who don't like what you do. Become ok with that.

Share the pride. My husband is an amazing woodworker (I'm so proud of all the things he can make!) He taught me that "proud" is also a woodworking term. When a piece of cut wood is a little too big–as in one shelf is thicker than the others–it is described as "proud." In woodworking you'd need to trim the proud piece back, but in leadership I interpret it as an opportunity to build the others up. As a leader, do you encourage pride among *all* of your team? Is there someone who needs you to see and acknowledge them, to build them up through recognition? Ask your team: what are you most proud of in your work recently?

Contact Jo Anne Preston for individual or group coaching at ***jpreston@RWHC.com*** *or 608-644-3261. For info re the RWHC Leadership Series go to* **www.RWHC.com/Services.aspx** *or contact Carrie Ballweg at* ***cballweg@RWHC.com*** *or 608-643-2343.*

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